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Revealing regional regeneration projects in three small towns in Aotearoa—New Zealand

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Abstract

We discuss case studies of three South Island small towns: Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru and their wider local authority jurisdictions, focusing on how local stakeholders are defining the issues facing these places and identifying, prioritising and investing in regeneration initiatives, sometimes with the support of central government and other external agencies. Our key finding is that small-town regeneration is complex, demands a long-term local collaborative approach, and significant investment in skills, information sharing and programme development, some of which needs to be provided by external, central government, agencies.

KEYWORDS

Aotearoa—New Zealand, enacting futures, regeneration, region, small town

1 | INTRODUCTION

After a three-decade hiatus and accompanying policy neglect, New Zealanders are renewing their interest in the future of the country's regions, small towns and their rural hinterlands. Questions are being raised about the best policies to follow and views vary. Economist, Equab (2016), for example, has controversially described a range of regional settlements as "Zombie Towns," suggesting that they are unworthy of further investment: and sociologist, Spoonley (2016), in a collection of more positive essays, has examined how in a globalising world, struggling regions might be "rebooted." Central Government's response has been to create new programmes and portfolios including Rural Communities and Rural Proofing (Ministry of Primary Industries, 2019a), and Regional Economic Development (Ministry of Primary Industries, 2019b), the latter associated with the Provincial Growth Fund,[1] allocating three billion dollars over a 3-year term to invest in regional economic development.

The Building Better Homes Towns and Cities: Ko ngā wā kaingā hei whakamahorahora National Science Challenge (BBHTC) (BBHTC, 2019) has responded to this changing environment by funding research into the day-to-day lived experience of regional and small-town New Zealand. It has supported work, demanding a co-production of knowledge research methodology, that interprets and advances the efforts of local stakeholders to make regions and their towns more attractive places to visit, and in which to live, work and do business. Our contribution to this stream of work, in a project entitled *Regenerating for Success*, has examined the situation facing three South Island east coast towns: Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru and studied local regeneration responses. In doing so, our multidisciplinary research team has combined

perspectives from geography, urban and rural studies, land economy, tourism, planning and social impact assessment.

Our starting point was to acknowledge the very serious social, geographical and policy implications of predicted population ageing and decline for regional settlements in Aotearoa—New Zealand (Jackson, 2011; see also Brabyn and Jackson, 2019). We also noted research pointing to the ways the country's regional towns are not as well-positioned economically when compared to our largest cities. Typically, such towns have populations holding fewer formal qualifications, are less productive per worker than in the larger urban areas and offer lower average wages. They tend to have more specialised economic bases (offering, e.g., significant services to agriculture and concentrating on secondary processing) and fewer start-up firms. Often, they offer fewer amenities or other benefits of agglomeration than larger cities (Lewis & Stillman, 2005; Maré, 2016). We also observed that in contradiction to these somewhat depressing prognostications, the international literature suggests that adequately supported locally initiated regeneration efforts can create positive change in regional towns and their rural hinterlands (Powe, Pringle, & Hart, 2015; Spires & Moore, 2017). Influenced by this work our research was designed to examine regeneration activities in a sample of regional towns and to add a stronger New Zealand perspective to the small-town regeneration literature.

Two broad research questions guided our work:

- How are local regeneration initiatives being organised and working to improve the economic, social, cultural and environmental performance of regions, small towns and their rural hinterlands?
- What drives success, and how can improvements be made and supported?

In the remainder of our paper, we first outline the key concepts underlying regeneration practice. We then discuss our methods, paying attention to the ideas underlying our approach and the range of data gathering techniques at our disposal. The key features of our case study towns are then outlined, followed by a brief description of the diverse array of local regeneration initiatives we encountered. Finally, we discuss the priority initiatives identified by our case study regeneration practitioners and draw a number of conclusions from that work.

2 | UNDERSTANDING AND STUDYING REGIONAL AND SMALL-TOWN REGENERATION—KEY CONCEPTS

Much regeneration literature focuses on attempts to make improvements to various aspects of large urban centres (Carter & Roberts, 2017; Garcia, 2004; Gentle & McGuirk, 2018; Gibson & Connell, 2011; Hall & Barrett, 2012; McNally & Granger, 2017; Roberts, 2017; Ruming, 2018; Shaw, 2018; Smith, 2012). Specific regeneration foci and activities take many and varied forms in places that differ historically, geographically, politically and in terms of the resources available for renewal efforts. In general terms, however, urban regeneration initiatives are designed to achieve four interconnected outcomes: enhancing the profile and economic prospects of populations, settlements and regions; improving the quality of life and social and cultural well-being of settlement populations; ensuring the sustainability of the bio-physical environment; and meliorating the built environment, including those of its elements associated with historical and cultural heritage. Regeneration is thus a multi-dimensional process delivering multiple outcomes (Roberts, Sykes, & Granger, 2017).

Having much the same foci, regeneration policies and initiatives have also been developed to advance the renewal and development of small regional towns and associated rural areas. As do Roberts et al. (2017) in the urban context, Powe et al. (2015) suggest in their review of two decades of international literature on small-town regeneration that the field is challenging and complex. One of the main distinguishing factors between work in larger urban centres, and efforts in small-town and rural regeneration, is that in the latter, local funding levels are often not sufficient to the task and skilled practitioners are in short supply. These particular features of small-town regeneration therefore raise the question of how external resources, particularly from central government, may be applied to support processes of local collaboration without overwhelming them.

Powe et al. (2015) conclude that adequately supported incremental local collaborative effort by many actors over the long term can be successful (see also Edwards, Goodwin, Pemberton, & Woods, 2000). A number of authors emphasise, particularly, the *long-term* nature of the regeneration process and the fact that "no single stakeholder [such as central or local government] has the resources or jurisdiction [and we would add, the mana or status] to tackle the multidimensional problems faced" (Markey, Halseth, & Manson, 2012, as cited in Powe et al., 2015). The success of regeneration activities is defined in terms of *functional integrated effectiveness* in a number of spheres. These may include, depending on local priorities: population; the needs and aspirations of cultural/ethnic groups; recreation, arts and culture; historic heritage; the regional economy; the bio-physical environment; commercial property; town centre development; housing; physical and social infrastructure; and transport and communication. Because the effects of regeneration efforts can take a long time to manifest, stakeholders, evaluators and monitors must be flexible and commit themselves to changing direction and

adopting new tactics if things do not go as initially planned (Spires & Moore, 2017).

Given the emphases that emerged during our fieldwork, we engaged with particular elements of a large international regeneration literature. The first relates to tourism-led regional and small-town regeneration (Campbell, McNair, Mackay, & Perkins, 2019; Dance, Mackay, & Perkins, 2018). This is a process through which tourism development is pursued strategically for the purposes of sustainable economic, social and spatial development (Fountain & Mackay, 2017; Kolb, 2017; Owen, 1990; Perkins, Mackay, Levy, Campbell, & Hills, 2018; Wise, 2016; Wise & Harris, 2017). It is often associated with attempts to enhance the reputation of the towns concerned to attract visitors and capital and extend the range of services and activities available to locals.

The second element of the regeneration literature important to our work deals with town centre commercial property development and the provision of allied public amenities. There is significant literature on property-led regeneration and some of this work relates to the small-town experience (Powe & Hart, 2017). Property-led regeneration is a multidimensional process (Attia & Ibrahim, 2018) in which finance, land, building materials and labour are assembled to create new spaces and buildings. This can create positive economic and social effects. The process is, however, often controversial, as inevitably displacement of people and their activities is required. Loss of historic heritage may also be a feature of such developments (Turok, 1992). Small towns are tackling property-led regeneration in different ways and on varying scales, ranging from a single public amenity housed in symbolic flagship architecture to multiple projects when an entire area undergoes economic restructuring. Powe, Hart, and Bek (2009) observe that property-led regeneration projects also provide an opportunity for local authorities to give consideration to environmental improvements for town centres as a whole, in terms of their infrastructure, such as lighting, footpaths, cycleways, roads and transport linkages into the town that make shopping and recreating there a safe and pleasant experience for residents and visitors (Powe & Shaw, 2003; Thomas & Bromley, 2003).

The third strand of the regeneration literature that guided our work focuses on the ways regeneration initiatives can draw on local cultural and environmental assets to improve places for residents in a series of iterative steps and layered, interconnected projects (Powe et al., 2015). Ruming (2018, p.5) argues that "regeneration projects (no matter what their size) should not be viewed in isolation but collectively as drivers of city-wide change." These perspectives are important in the context of our research, where particularly in one setting the need to integrate a growing number of regeneration efforts was demanding attention.

In summary, and in the absence of a significant and integrated New Zealand regeneration literature, our scan of the international literature points to four key ideas in the understanding of small-town regeneration: long term local collaboration, capability building, effective programme integration, and a fine balance between local initiative and external support.

3 | METHODS

We adopted a case study approach to our research. Our case studies in Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru (Figure 1) began by focusing on how local stakeholders from the public, third and private sectors defined the issues facing their towns: and identified, prioritised and invested in regeneration initiatives to improve settlement performance, sometimes with the support of the central government. In a second round of work, we studied a small set of priority initiatives in more detail. Taking a lead from realist evaluators we set out to attempt an understanding in each case of "what works for whom in what circumstances … and why" (Pawson & Manzano-Santaella, 2012, p. 178).

We were also charged by the Directors and Board of BBHTC with taking a co-construction of knowledge approach to our case studies. We interpreted this to mean, after DeLyser and Sui (2013), Maclean and Cullen (2009) and Robinson and Tansey (2006), that in part our role was to act as traditional social researchers—to gather data, analyse it and write and present reports—but in doing that work we were also to interact very closely with local stakeholders in the development of research priorities and questions, and more broadly, in the unfolding of the research process. Our research was therefore guided by ideas about enactment: searching for a way of doing research that would enable the residents of our case study settlements to create new futures.

With these emphases in mind, we started our work by creating statistical profiles of each of our small-town case study sites. The data for this work were gleaned from the Statistics New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment databases (Campbell, 2019). The purpose here was to understand trends in a range of population and socio-economic variables within and across each town. This knowledge was supplemented by our reading of past research (e.g., Jackson, 2014) and social impact studies (e.g., Fitzgerald & Taylor, 1989) conducted over several decades in Canterbury and Otago rural and regional centres.

Media stories about recent change and development challenges faced in Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru were also important. There were many of these produced before and during our fieldwork and they were an invaluable source of additional data. These stories often pointed to the priority issues being talked about and acted on in each town. There were strong links between these stories, the actors involved

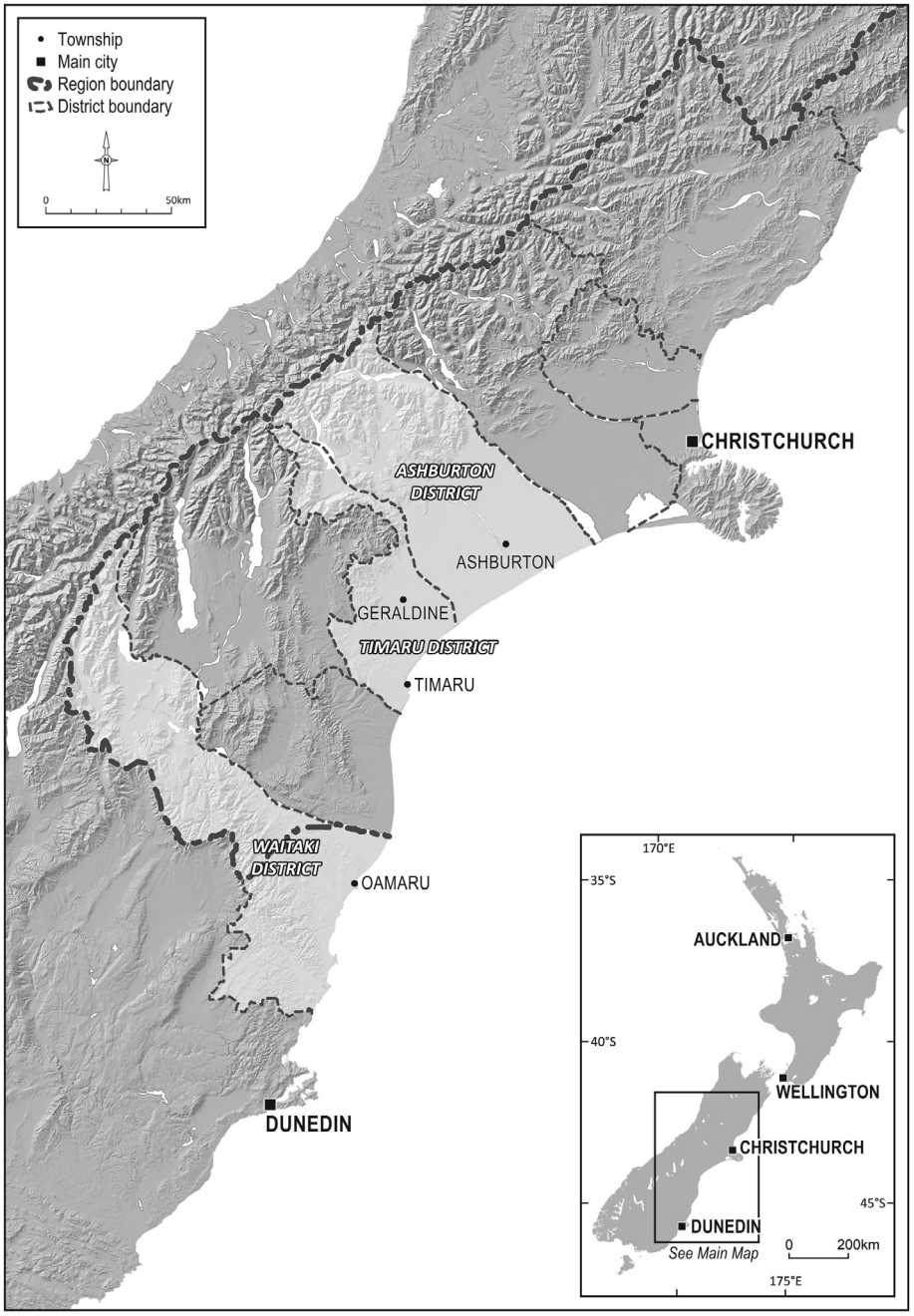

FIGURE 1 Ashburton, Timaru and Waitaki Districts

and local authority planning and policy work and we also therefore drew on such material where relevant. This often brought us into close interaction with local authority staff who further interpreted the statistical material we had produced in our town profiles.

The descriptive statistics, media stories and planning and policy documents provided us with a strong contextual understanding of the situations faced by the residents of each town. They also allowed us to understand how the interconnections and flows of people, ideas and capital between the settlements and their regional, national and international partners were configured. Importantly, these data directed us to potential research participants.

Over the course of our fieldwork, we developed close connections with a core group of research participants. This necessitated multiple visits to the case study towns, considerable email interaction, individual and group meetings and interviews ($n = 86$), some of which were audio-recorded and others the source of detailed notes.

In the second round of work, after discussing possible and preferred research directions with our research participants, we began to focus on a small set of priority regeneration activities in more detail. In Timaru District, we thus conducted 35 interviews to better understand the connections between the development of the visitor economy and recreational and related service provision for local residents.

Focusing on the challenges associated with the provision of town-centre commercial, retail and hotel premises we interviewed 26 stakeholders in Ashburton and Timaru. In Oamaru, our emphasis was on how improvement could be achieved by the local council and other community leaders in their attempts to integrate a suite of regeneration initiatives. We thus conducted 25 interviews with local stakeholders who were involved in some way in attempts to revitalise the town.

Data gathered from our interviews were supplemented with a good deal of observational and photographic activity. We thus familiarised ourselves with the landscapes of our study towns and this, in turn, raised questions about the potential and management of the built and natural aspects of the urban environment associated with regeneration activities. Some of this observational work was planned in advance, but in other cases it occurred spontaneously at the end of our interviews. These mobile interpretative excursions (Mackay, Nelson, & Perkins, 2018) illustrated the enthusiasm our research participants displayed for the regeneration activities in which they were involved. Good examples include a walking tour of a town centre with the mayor of one of the study towns, visits to planned development sites with property investors, and a guided tour of tourism sites led by a trustee of a community organisation.

As our interpretations unfolded, we tested them with our research participants during the interviews and meetings: using this developing knowledge to feed into our understanding of local regeneration plans and activity. In the second stage of our data analysis, we applied thematic analysis to each set of case study interviews and the other data discussed above (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). In this process, we noted the themes in each data source (within-case) and across all the cases (Yin, 2014). Where possible and relevant, the results of this analysis were again discussed with our research participants. In this way, we were able to co-create an understanding of developments in each town and also contribute to ideas and practices that could be applied to future policy activity.

4 | THE CASE STUDY TOWNS

We now turn to a short description of the demographic, socio-economic and other profile information on Ashburton, Timaru and Oamaru.

4.1 | Ashburton

The population of Ashburton township is approximately 20,000 (cf. Ashburton District c. 33,000) (Ashburton District Council, 2019) and has been increasing steadily since 2001 after a period of stasis post-1995. Located only an hour's drive south of Christchurch, the South Island's largest city, Ashburton has many of the characteristics of a stand-alone rural town, but is also inextricably linked to its larger neighbour. There is a strong commuting connection between the two places. Ashburton's town centre provides a range of consumption services. Rural services, retailing and hospitality are notable contributors to the Ashburton economy. Our fieldwork indicated that the combined influences of e-retailing and shopping opportunities in Christchurch had a dampening effect on the settlement's retail sector in particular. This was an evident source for local concern. Agriculture, including dairy, sheep and beef production, horticulture and secondary processing at several sites, is the dominant source of wealth for Ashburton with the increasing importance of this sector over time. Construction is also a source of wealth but manufacturing produces only a third of the value per capita in Ashburton when compared to agriculture (Campbell, 2019).

4.2 | Timaru

Timaru has a population of approximately 28,000 (cf. Timaru District c. 44,000) (Littlewood, 2018) and has been increasing modestly after a period of decline between the early 1980s and 2000. Its central location and the wider Timaru District's proximity to the visually spectacular high country and mountains of the interior make it important for servicing transiting international tourists travelling from the Christchurch International Airport and also for domestic tourists. Timaru is very much a stand-alone settlement with a regional airport, an active port with a rail link to an inland port in Rolleston, south of Christchurch and a broad economic base in manufacturing, agriculture and services. Agriculture is heavily influenced by dairy, with horticulture, intensive cropping, meat and wool also playing important roles. Significant employment in manufacturing, food and beverage processing, engineering and distribution operations contribute to extensive export and the domestic supply of a wide range of goods and services (Aoraki Development, 2016). Retailing and hospitality also play a notable role, but as we shall discuss in more depth later in the paper, there was a widespread view that more could be done to benefit from tourism development. Timaru also has a higher than average health care and social assistance sector when compared to the New Zealand average (Campbell, 2019).

4.3 | Oamaru

Oamaru township has a population of approximately 12,000 (cf. Waitaki District c. 21,000) (Waitaki District Council, 2017) and has grown modestly in recent years after a population decline from 1996 to 2003. The southern-most of our case studies, Oamaru is very much a stand-alone settlement.

It is the service town for a thriving irrigated agricultural economy centred on dairy, sheep and beef farming based on the plains of the Waitaki Valley and the extensive hill country of the district (Mackay & Perkins, 2019; McCrostie Little, Taylor, & McClintock, 1998; Taylor, Harris, McClintock, & Mackay, 2015). Significant employment is found in secondary meat and dairy processing. Hospitality and associated retail activity, plus social services, provide an important element of economic diversification and also attract amenity migrants. Oamaru is well-known for its precinct of neoclassical buildings, built with locally quarried limestone that attracts international and domestic visitors (Mackay, Taylor, & Perkins, 2018). The nearby harbour is recognised as a site of national significance by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, and is home to the little blue penguin colony. In addition, the Waitaki Valley to the North East of Oamaru is increasingly a visitor attraction as a result of the Alps to Ocean (A_2O) cycle trail (Mackay, Taylor, & Perkins, 2019). The rapidity of change associated with a number of successful regeneration initiatives, and proposals to establish more, underscored a growing desire to integrate all that was being done more effectively.

4.4 | Characteristics held in common

In all three towns, relatively recent declines in population are very much front of mind among local stakeholders. While there is a range of employment opportunities available, there is a limited skilled labour pool, and this is reflected in low unemployment rates of under 3%. Finding and keeping skilled workers is thus a major concern for employers. Further complicating the picture in our three case study towns is the fact that median incomes are not high and housing costs are increasing while being considerably lower than in the country's major centres (Campbell, 2019). Equally, population ageing is a source of local concern and so attracting and keeping young people is a high priority, and some regeneration initiatives are aimed at achieving this outcome. As our interviews indicated, all three towns, to varying degrees, are therefore searching for ways to diversify their economies and create environments and activities that are attractive to locals, visitors and potential migrants. These activities are linked to various levels of place promotion. These are partly aesthetic, producing and promoting physically attractive townscapes, parks, gardens and tourist spaces, but also cultural, in the form of advertising and hosting regionally and nationally important festivals and events.

Notably, our interviews found with regard to all three towns that it is people who are "retired" who are often actively involved in regeneration efforts. In our interviews we found ourselves talking with people well into their 60s and 70s who were keen participants in regeneration activities and debates.

5 | THE REGENERATION INITIATIVES

5.1 | A diverse array of local initiatives

We began our fieldwork influenced by widespread popular conceptions about variation in regional fortunes with differing experiences of growth, stasis or decline (Spoonley, 2016). This led us to expect that we would encounter an air of concern and despondency in the settlements we chose to study. However, on entering the field we were surprised by the significant number and variety of regeneration activities being discussed and vigorously pursued by local people and agencies. In our first year of study, we created an inventory of these activities and interviewed many of those involved. We noted that in most cases these initiatives were largely local in nature—being facilitated by combinations of local government, third sector and private sector actors, and in a very few cases, resourced with some external input, from regional or central government agencies. These diverse regeneration activities can be placed into four *interrelated* categories: economic development; community development and planning; historical, cultural and environmental heritage conservation and; commercial town centre property development and allied public amenities (Table 1).

It is important to point out that at the time of our fieldwork, local government's capacity to engage actively in regeneration was constrained by the 2010 amendments to the Local Government Act 2002 with its "back to basics" approach, removing a requirement to promote social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing (Minister of Local Government, 2010). At the end our fieldwork a 2019 amendment to the Act reinstated this role, giving local government a legislative mandate to lead and facilitate holistic development aimed at increasing community wellbeing. Even with this mandate, however, smaller councils are constrained in their regeneration activities due to small rating bases which are their main means of raising revenue (Cheyne, 2016, p. 128). As noted by the Local Government Rates Inquiry Panel (2007, p. 157), one way of overcoming this difficulty is to engage in public-private partnerships as a means of funding public projects.

5.2 | Three priority initiatives

Unable to pursue a detailed study of all of the regeneration initiatives we encountered (again see Table 1), in the second and third years of our study, we concentrated our efforts on three areas of regeneration identified as priorities through our reading of media stories and as supported by our research participants. These were tourism-led regeneration in Timaru, town centre property-led regeneration in Ashburton and Timaru, and the integration of multi-scalar sets of regeneration initiatives in Oamaru.

TABLE 1 Exemplars of regeneration activities and key agencies

Regeneration activity category	Activity	Key agencies involved
Economic development	Business parks	Local governments and allied council-controlled organisations
	Economic development offices	
	Tourism development offices	
Community development and planning	Youth support programmes (Ashburton)	Local marae
	Festivals and events: Multi-cultural bite (Ashburton); Timaru Festival of Roses (Caroline Bay); Geraldine Multi Challenge Event; Oamaru Fire and Steam Festival	Community volunteers, local trusts and service clubs with the support of local councils
	Urban and regional cycleways (A_2O)	Local government with financial support from central government in the case of regional cycleways
Historical, cultural and environmental heritage conservation	Otipua wetland restoration and recreation area (Timaru)	Local trust, community volunteers, community funding agencies and local government
	Oamaru Harbour and Tyne Historic Precinct; Whitestone City	Local trust; local government
	Oamaru little blue penguin colony and visitor centre	Community members/central government/national conservation NGO/local government
Commercial town centre property development and allied public amenities	Eastfield Precinct (Ashburton)	Private developer and local government
	Hydro Grand Hotel site redevelopment; District Town Centres Study (Timaru)	Private developer; local government
	Opera House restoration (Oamaru)	Local government with financial support from central government and local community funding agencies

5.2.1 | Tourism-led regeneration—Timaru

Tourism development in Timaru has been a vexed issue for several decades and we heard conflicting stories in our interviews about its success and failure. The question being asked by tourism development stakeholders in Timaru and which guided our work with them was: how can local government and allied tourism development agencies and actors realise the potential of a currently underdeveloped visitor economy and in turn provide a greater range of recreational and allied services to visitors and locals? This question was driven partly by the knowledge that Timaru had been an important regional seaside tourist destination in the past (Dance et al., 2018) and the view that despite growth in a variety of other economic sectors tourism could again play a more important role in Timaru's future.

Our interviews traversed three areas of discussion: the role of domestic and international tourism in Timaru District; aspirations for tourism development; and barriers to progress. In terms of role, our interviewees perceived that Timaru could benefit more significantly from recent growth in international visitor numbers to New Zealand (Pawson & the Biological Economies Team, 2018) by hosting more tourists. But most importantly they stressed the potential also to take advantage of domestic tourism: the hope being that this would diversify the local economy by increasing tourism revenue, making better use of existing community recreational resources, and creating a case for reinvestment in these and similar new resources. A good case in point is the potential of such cultural facilities as the Te Ana Māori Rock Art Centre, the South Canterbury Museum and the Aigantighe Art Gallery to continue to serve Timaru residents while *also* attracting visitors (interviews with Timaru cultural facilities managers).

In terms of aspirations, our interviewees talked about what they saw as the great potential to build on an existing suite of events and festivals run by community organisations and trusts. These include: the Caroline Bay Summer Carnival; the Geraldine Festival of Arts and Plants; the Timaru Rose Festival; and the Rock & Hop weekend, a local celebration of classic cars, bikes and caravans (Dance et al., 2018). These events and festivals all attract significant numbers of domestic tourists. Potential was also seen in holding a greater number of regional and national sporting events using existing facilities and making the most of the town's location. The benefit here to the district was seen as not just being in the events

themselves, but also in the retailing and hospitality business generated by the participants' supporters.

Our interviewees also aspired to finding a balance between destination promotion and strategic destination planning, the latter of which was seen as being nearly non-existent. In this, they emphasised how important it was to find ways of working more effectively with neighbouring districts such as Mackenzie, Waimate and Waitaki who also have interests in tourism development and destination planning. A number of our interviewees with a stronger interest in international tourism stressed the importance of strengthening Timaru's connections to Tourism New Zealand, the central government's national tourism promotion organisation. This relationship they considered had been undermined in recent years as Timaru's economic priorities had moved away from a focus on tourism towards agriculture, secondary food processing and transport services.

At the time we began our research, tentative steps had been made to refocus tourism development efforts by the Timaru District Council, beginning with the establishment of Aoraki Tourism, a council-controlled organisation with a focus on place and activity promotion (Aoraki Tourism, 2019). This reflected a view that the Council was now better able to take steps in this direction in light of the already discussed changes to the Local Government Act. But despite this modest development, there was disagreement among community stakeholders about what else was needed to advance tourism development in Timaru. While a limited budget had been negotiated for Aoraki Tourism, and to fund community festivals, there are no significant local funds to pay for further tourism development, including employing a team of skilled staff. As one senior council staff member put it: "it is difficult to provide a Rolls Royce service with a Mini budget". It is hard to see how these resource constraints will be overcome entirely without some kind of external support across a range of dimensions from either the private or public sectors. The link here with debates in the international literature is quite clear: limited local tax bases are a drag on local capacity building and presently there is little revenue sharing from central government to help defray the costs of such work (see, e.g., Powe et al., 2015).

At the end of our fieldwork, the Timaru District Council had reached a stage where it was attempting to develop a more comprehensive framework to increase coordination of resources and stakeholders from across the sector. Our Council interviewees indicated that plans were in place to employ a person with the capacity and skills to advance collaboration in the area, make the best use of digital media, and to oversee the development of a tourism development strategy. Initial thinking was being focused on support for growth in domestic tourism while acknowledging that the township of Geraldine, on the edge of Timaru District, needed help in making the best of the flows of international *and* domestic tourists. These small steps are the beginning of a process that will take quite some time to reach fruition and will involve much incremental collaborative effort (as per Powe et al., 2015).

5.2.2 | Property-led regeneration—Ashburton and Timaru

Our interviews with property professionals in Ashburton and Timaru point to the importance of *locally based* and committed investors in the development of town-centre commercial property, and the need to consider the challenges they face. The question that emerged as central to property-led regeneration in Ashburton and Timaru was: how can local property entrepreneurs be enabled and supported to contribute to the regeneration of town centres? Interviewees indicated that ways need to be found to encourage their efforts and value their commitment, while at the same time ensuring the best possible environmental and service outcomes.

The property entrepreneurs we interviewed are successful local business people who have made their wealth in areas other than the property sector and now want to invest in their home towns. A good example is a Timaru property developer who is the director of several companies in Aotearoa—New Zealand and Australia and who has lived for 30 years in the town. His principal business manufactures products for distribution to Australia, the Pacific and Continental Europe but in the last 5 years he has decided to invest in a major town centre property development. It became clear in our interviews that these are people who are engaging passionately with town centre development projects (in Timaru a $40 m apartment and hotel complex and in Ashburton a $40 m multi-use shopping and social services precinct) but who are also reporting struggles with the institutions who finance property development (Tasker, 2017; Williams, 2018). Our interviews highlighted the difficulties of raising bank finance to fund such activities because of the perceived high risks and low returns involved in small-town property development (Davidson, 2017). This situation means also that there is typically little or no presence of institutional property investors in these settlements, thus reinforcing the importance of local people able and willing to invest.

In property development terms these developers are neophytes and have little or no understanding of the processes and pitfalls of the development process. They find the processes complex and "frustrating" (Williams, 2018): particularly those elements associated with planning and consenting; and are easily discouraged. Local planners with their strong focus on regulatory planning and relative inexperience with large development projects are also often unable to provide helpful advice or support in the process because of the

structural positions they hold within local government. They cannot regulate and facilitate at the same time.

Given the potential contribution of local property entrepreneurs to the regeneration of small towns there is scope for policy development designed to help entrepreneurs, local government and other stakeholders to engage more effectively and cooperatively. Again, this will require collaborative effort over the long term and also external support for capability building (Edwards et al., 2000; Powe et al., 2015).

5.2.3 | Multi-scalar sets of regeneration initiatives—Oamaru

The diverse regeneration initiatives with which we engaged in Oamaru highlighted the need for much better integration of multiple activities. This led to the development of the following research question: what is the role of the local council and other community leaders in achieving integration across initiatives, and what is needed to ensure that regeneration practitioners are working towards common goals and are incentivised to do so?

We focused on three sets of initiatives. The first set is local in nature and provided the initial momentum for regeneration in Oamaru. These initiatives are associated with planning and implementing regeneration of the Victorian Heritage Precinct, and in the harbour area the little blue penguin colony and visitor centre, the children's cycle track and the steampunk playground. The second set of initiatives is linked to the A_2O cycle trail (Wilson, 2016), which starts in the Southern Alps at Aoraki-Mt Cook, connects two districts and transverses the Waitaki catchment, ending in Oamaru. The A_2O is national in scope in that it is based around a cycle trail planned and implemented as part of the National Cycleway Project Nga Haerenga—The New Zealand Cycle Trail, (Bell, 2018; Pawson & the Biological Economies Team, 2018), but was initiated and organised by local groups and businesses, and the Waitaki District Council, with input from Central Government's Department of Conservation, and the energy corporate Meridian Energy. The third set of initiatives is broadly involved with a Geopark proposal led by the Waitaki District Council in conjunction with partners based partly beyond the boundaries of the district such as Te Rūnanga O Ngāi Tahu and UNESCO. The Geopark began as a local and then district initiative but has, in the last year, expanded to a global reach with the recent selection of the Waitaki Geopark as the single New Zealand proposal being put forward for formal recognition by UNESCO (Waitaki District Council, 2018).

The Waitaki District Council has played a key role in all of these regeneration initiatives, including providing staff resources, leadership, planning, selective investment and fundraising. Yet it is clear also that regeneration has depended heavily on the efforts of individuals and community groups with skills and the ability to attract the necessary capital. They have included long-standing residents and people who have moved to the area because of the lifestyle, available housing and opportunities for creative input. The challenge has been to encourage, facilitate and, as necessary, coordinate place-based and thematic efforts by local leaders and groups, through formal and informal planning.

In the Oamaru and the wider Waitaki District these efforts have been largely successful. An essential element of success has been the ability to mobilise local and external resources such as bringing together volunteers and a community of agencies from across the country in support of the Geopark Dossier. Attracting capable actors has also been important. A good example is the recent appointment of a heritage planner and tourism development manager in the district, a major commitment given the limited local tax base.

Finishing on a small note of concern, however, there are presently signs of "up-scaling anxiety" being displayed by some residents in response to what they see as a new wave of change in Oamaru. The international literature contains many examples of where conflicts can arise because residents have differing views on change (Costa & Chalip, 2005; Green, 2000; Haughton & Counsell, 2004; Mitchell & de Waal, 2009; Paradis, 2000). Attention will have to be paid to careful integration of Oamaru's many regeneration activities including active, ongoing community leadership, to help mitigate this issue.

6 | CONCLUSION

The recent emergence, after a 30-year hiatus, of a growing interest in the futures of regional areas and towns in Aotearoa—New Zealand is novel and exciting. Our research is one of a number of current attempts to understand this phenomenon (see also Nel and Connelly, 2019). Turning first to our overarching research questions it clear that small-town regeneration initiatives in Aotearoa—New Zealand are being organised in a variety of ways to improve settlement performance. There is often a high level of commitment from local public, third and private sector actors to the development of these initiatives, which is a key element contributing to their success. There are, however, moments of struggle where leadership is not as strong as necessary, priorities clash, professional roles limit action, resources and skills are inadequate, and integration of multiple strands of work is incomplete.

We have found very little locally produced research in which to locate our efforts and have thus turned to the international urban, regional and small-town regeneration literature for guidance. Our research findings support those of Powe et al. (2015) and Illsley and Coles (2009), who suggest that it is important to build local capacity and skill in regeneration in

a way that encourages multiple leaders and organisations to collaborate effectively. Often there is no single factor or project on which successful regeneration hinges. Rather, it is an investment in place over time in a range of integrated activities using a combination of local and external resources and energy that has hastened progress. We have found also that the development of sound regeneration strategy is important and this is a process that is only just beginning in our case study towns. We can see, following Carter and Roberts (2017), reflecting on European experience, that such strategy will have to take account of a range of factors associated with actors, activities, networks, leadership, value and values, resourcing, monitoring and evaluation.

Our findings also point to a group of challenges to small-town regeneration that reflect longstanding elements of public policy in Aotearoa—New Zealand. In particular, the ways the roles and functions of local government are structured mean that its financial resources are limited, therefore employing staff with specialist expertise across a range of regeneration-related skill-sets is difficult. Thus, part of our time with our research participants focused on identifying the support needed beyond local resources to advance regeneration efforts. We canvassed the usefulness of central funding for human capability building and support for encouraging an integrated approach to multiple and overlapping regeneration efforts. Interviewees had high hopes for the new Provincial Growth Fund that had become available at the end of our fieldwork. While its main focus is economic development, there is potential for such a fund to encompass the needs identified above. Careful investment has the potential to make a significant contribution beyond a simplistic project approach. In addition, our participants emphasised the important role central government agencies might take to act as information clearing houses to benefit local activity.

Finally, the initiatives we have studied have highlighted the important role researchers can have in small regional towns if they are prepared to work with residents and other stakeholders on the co-construction of knowledge and the enactment of local futures. In these regional centres, research to inform decision-making is highly valued but often beyond the budgets of local government, community trusts and small private entities. As one planning manager put it: "your project is of considerable use to us particularly as we are a small council, typically without access to the sorts of research capabilities you can bring."

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ENDNOTE

[1] At the time of our fieldwork, the Provincial Growth Fund was in its infancy. While one of our case study towns had made an application for funds at the end of our research, no decision had been made. Apart from this the Provincial Growth Fund did not figure in our work.

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